

To: Senator Ed Gomes, Representative Peter Tercyak and Members of the Labor Committee

From: Karim Calle

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Testimony in support of Wage Theft Legislation

S.B. 1037, S.B. 914 and S.B. 106

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I am testifying today in support of

S.B. 1037 AN ACT CONCERNING EMPLOYEE LIENS AGAINST EMPLOYERS FOR UNPAID WAGES

S.B. 914 AN ACT CONCERNING AN EMPLOYER'S FAILURE TO PAY WAGES

S.B. 106 AN ACT CONCERNING RETALIATION AGAINST IMMIGRANT WORKERS

My name is Karim Calle. I am a resident of East Haven and for several years I've been a member of Unidad Latina en Accion, an organization that defends the rights of immigrants and workers throughout the New Haven area and other parts of the state.

I am a mother to a 22 old-month daughter and a worker. I know what it's like to make ends meet. My free time with family and community is minimal. I work, attend school full-time, and complete a social work internship in order to provide a decent future for my daughter.

I have tolerated sexual harassment on the job and kept silent due to the fear of being left jobless. I have waitressed for about 8 hours a day and only making \$30 per day. I have a family that I need to provide for and student loans that need to be paid. And I am a U.S. citizen. I immigrated here as child.

Immigrants often have it worse. Some earn as little as \$3 per hour. Three workers last year sought our help because they were beaten by their employers. For all that they endure, the Connecticut laws do not protect them. The era of slavery is over, but many workers are treated as slaves, and the law allows it. It's time for justice!

I want to tell you a story today about how the minimum wage laws are failing to protect workers from wage theft.

At Renaissance Nail salons in Darien and New Canaan six women worked as manicurists and gave massages. They weren't paid minimum wage or overtime. The boss kept some of their tips. They couldn't go to the bathroom or have meal breaks. The women also faced discrimination.

They were sexually harassed by the boss, and slapped around by him. Two of the women were fired when they asked for a day off to take care of their children who were ill. Several developed health problems because of not being able to go to the bathroom regularly.

Three of these women filed a lawsuit for all of these violations, and later another three women joined the lawsuit. Community organizations held demonstrations outside the nail salons.

While the case proceeded in court, the employer's three houses in Darien mysteriously went into foreclosure, and he "sold" his two salons to his niece, who claimed to know nothing about the labor dispute. The two main employers also declared bankruptcy.

The workers' claim was for about \$370,000. Two of the smaller employers settled for about \$20,000. In 2012 the major employers failed to show up to court, so the court issued a default judgment against them for \$209,000, but these two employers are nowhere to be found and have no known assets. So even though the women from Renaissance nail salons are owed at least \$209,000, and the court entered a judgment, the women have no way to collect the wages and damages owed to them.

Fraudulent employers use these practices frequently. They sell the business to a family member, they declare bankruptcy, and there is no way for the worker to get their wages, even when the court orders the employer to pay.

I urge you to approve SB 1037, so that the court can place a lien on the employer's property and prevent the employer from getting away with theft. We also need SB 914 and SB 106, so there are real consequences when employers steal wages and retaliate against workers for speaking out.

This story makes me angry because it's very common with the immigrant community. Employees should have the opportunity to spend time with family and not sacrifice their health and family to maintain someone else's business. The wage theft laws will seek justice for those who have worked hard and will ensure that employers pay the salaries owed. I will continue to protest businesses that cheat workers until justice is served.

I'm tired of my community being trampled on as if we were slaves with no freedom. My family has faced wage theft and discrimination because of the language barrier. We all deserve human rights and social justice.

I urge you to vote yes in favor of updating the Connecticut laws to improve our rights at work. Thank you for listening to my testimony today.